



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Chapter 1

The Question That Saved My Life

In early 1938, my mother saved my life. I was eight months old.

She was born in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, in 1907 and named Hedwig. It was customary in my grandmother's family to name children with clearly Christian names to avoid anti-Semitic attitudes and remarks. Hedwig was the name of a beatified Polish Christian, Queen Jedwiga, who in 1386 married the King of Lithuania, creating the Polish-Lithuania Empire. People with this name are usually just called "Hedy." Even Hedy Lamarr's name was Hedwig.

My maternal grandmother was born and lived in Wadowice, Poland, where Pope John Paul II was born and grew up.

Mother's last name was Schreiber, which means "writer" in German. My name is Peter Kraus Schreiber because in Spanish culture one's mother's family name is used after one's father's family name.

Mother was the third of four daughters of Jacob Schreiber and Charlotte Nesselroth. My grandfather, Jacob, sold used furniture that was refinished and repainted in the front street-level floor of his simple house.

During the last four years (1921–1925) of academic high school (gymnasium) mother was the top student in the class. That was highly annoying to the rest of the superior students because the top student was not only a woman, but, to make it even more irritating to them, a Jewess.

My grandparents were not well-to-do, but, among their four daughters, my mother was so promising that my grandfather said to her, "Hedy, I know we are poor, but I think you should go to the university. Somehow I will figure out how to pay for room, board, clothing, and school materials in Prague."

So my mother went to college at Karl's University in Prague, the oldest university in Central Europe, founded by Emperor Karl in the late fourteenth century.

In the evening of the first day of class Mother met my dad, Hanus Kraus. They both had gone to a meeting of a Zionist organization called Hashomer Hatzair. My dad was starting law school. My mother chose medicine. Both doctorates took seven years. They dated for three years; then, on August 16, 1932, very secretly, they married in Smichov, now a suburb of Prague, just up the Vltava (Moldau) River, where they often kayaked.

Not even their parents were invited to their wedding and it was not published. Only the synagogue in Smichov recorded the wedding.

In those years a medical student discovered to be married, or any student discovered to be pregnant, was simply thrown out of school. For the rare female medical student, pregnancy was unthinkable.

Four years later in early summer 1936, Mother became the seventh woman in Central Europe to become a doctor—Dr. Hedwig Kraus.

While in college, all those seven years, they shared sports extensively. During winter they skied but did not use any ski lifts. In summer they hiked and also kayaked all over Europe, especially on the Danube River in Austria, the Rhone in France, the Inn in Germany, and the Vltava in Czechoslovakia.

During those school years, Mother did not become pregnant even though in those years no contraceptive medicines existed. Mother was already knowledgeable about gynecology and pediatrics and had figured out a way to avoid pregnancy. That saved her from losing her doctorate.

I have been told by relatives and friends who knew her that she was a truly remarkable woman: highly intelligent, compassionate, humble, quite musical—she played the violin—very funny, gorgeously beautiful, gentle, and loved sports.

Nine months after graduation, on a beautiful, sunny spring day, May 28, 1937, I was born in Teplice, in Bohemia, just 13 days after Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was born in Smichov, where my parents had married.

The Question

During the winter in early 1938, my mother had to travel to Vienna to a medical conference of German-speaking physicians from all over Europe. Vienna is about a day's train ride away from Prague. Dad went along, and they took their skis with them to go skiing in the beautiful Austrian Alps after the conference.

I was eight months old and was left with my nanny at my grandparents' home in Bilina. They were Wilhelm Kraus, attorney and judge, and Emilie Wertheimer.

Mother did not look Jewish. She had blond, curly hair and blue eyes. I am told by the very few relatives whose lives were saved and I have been lucky to meet, that Meryl Streep resembles my mother closely, and so I like to see her movies; it is like being able to see my mother.

One day during the conference, Mother was invited for dinner by two German doctors. After that day's conference she went to the hotel to change clothes before dinner. Together, my parents planned a question for her to ask during dinner. Father was not included in the conference or the dinner.

So at the dinner, mother asked the German doctors, "What are we going to do with the Jews?"

One of them answered, "No problem at all, Dr. Kraus. We are going to get rid of every one of them. I am a member of the Nazi party and am busily working on the medical experiments we are going to pursue in the concentration camps, which we

are already starting to build. Oh, you don't know about the concentration camps? Well, we are trying to keep that a secret from all foreigners. But since you are German, if you stay for a little after dinner, I will tell you about the camps."

She stayed. After the explanation, she rushed back to the hotel. My parents agreed that going skiing was not smart. The next morning they took the train home. Mother went to Ostrava where her family lived, Father to Bilina. They told all their relatives and Jewish friends what they could expect from the German Christians. Most relatives did not believe it could get *that* bad.

My dad's father said, "Oh, Hitler—he is a little crazy but not *that* crazy!" Kristallnacht (Cristal Night) occurred just a few months later that year. Cristal Night was the night in Germany in the fall of 1938 that German Christians broke the glass storefronts of Jews, looted the shops, and humiliated, beat, and killed Jews as the beginning of the Nazi plan to exterminate them.

But two of my mother's three sisters and my Great Uncle Roman *did* believe my parents' warning, and that saved their lives, their spouses, and children. Those friends and all of my other relatives (approximately 200) who did not believe my parents' report were gassed by the Nazis in the concentration camps.

My Aunt Frieda, the oldest of the four sisters, was not gassed. Her three children and her husband were shot by German soldiers right next to their house. When Aunt Frieda came home from errands and saw their bodies, she managed to escape. She walked by night all the way to Ankara, Turkey. There she took a ship to the British protectorate that is now Israel.

My parents immediately moved to Prague, about 50 miles from Bilina. They stayed with Aunt Sidonie (Sidi), my mother's next older sister, husband Joseph Bachner, and daughters Hanah and Ruth. We stayed in their apartment while my parents planned their escape.

Both cousins, Hanah and Ruth, now still remember that, in Prague, the main problem was chasing me all through the apartment to be able to get me into the bathtub.

In Prague my parents met a German, Herr Hillbrecht, who had been expelled from Germany for misbehavior. This man had traveled to southern Chile, bought a large highly wooded farm, and returned to Europe to get workers to cut timber. Hillbrecht knew the Chilean ambassador in Prague. He bought visas from the embassy and sold them to the Jews who needed visas. He earned a good profit and got workers for his farm.

My parents did not care to which country the visas were, as long as it was outside Europe. They got their visas to Chile.

Hillbrecht collected from us the money for our visas and for the visas for the families of Aunt Sidi and Uncle Roman. But, evidently to earn additional profits, he delivered only the visas for us and for one more family, not two. So my parents decided that my mother's Uncle Roman, being my grandmother's next younger

sibling and therefore, much older than his niece, Sidonie, my aunt, was in more danger, and gave him the visa for his family to use.

The Fate of My Relatives

Aunt Sidi did not get a visa for her family. The German simply stole our money and disappeared. Had this not happened, my cousins Hanah and Ruth and I would have grown up together in Chile.

Aunt Sidi, with her family, went through hell to escape the Germans. Uncle Joseph crossed the border into Poland by bribing a railway man, who let him hide under a freight car; he jumped off while the train was moving between stations after it had crossed into Poland.

Ruth and Hanah, ages 14 and 12, who were stateless at birth, crossed the border into Poland. They dressed as Polish girls and practiced the language until they sounded as if they were Polish girls. They crossed the border on a train along with a girl their age who worked in Ostrava for our Aunt Frieda and daily crossed the border to Poland by train. A Polish soldier, a young recruit on customs duty, leaning lazily with his rifle in his arm while chewing on a toothpick, just waved the three girls on.

Aunt Sidi also crossed the border illegally. For safety she wore several layers of clothing but still hurt herself when she jumped off the freight car.

This is how the Bachner family escaped from the Germans in March 1939 from Bohemia, which was occupied already, to Poland, then still free.

After staying with relatives for a few weeks in Krakow, a large city just north of Auschwitz, they managed under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances in the highly anti-Semitic culture, to get to Danzig on the Baltic Sea.

British Quakers, who were in Poland to save lives by helping "endangered species," had given the Bachner family visas. On a small ship, highly overloaded with fleeing Jews, they almost sank in a storm but eventually transported themselves via Sweden all the way to Britain.

Our Escape to the Promised Land

My parents and I got tickets on a ship from Holland to Chile. But first we had to fly to Amsterdam, a very costly affair. For Jews to travel by train through Germany in late 1938 was not a safe thing to do. Kristallnacht occurred right around that time.

My parents, even though knowing this was a one-way trip, carried only a minimum number of belongings, so as not to appear to be leaving Czechoslovakia. The pro-German Czechs and the Germans in the Sudetenland—Bohemia—were already quite suspicious about Jews trying to escape. So my parents took only small pieces of luggage, photos, and mementos when they left their homeland.

We arrived on the coast of Chile at Valparaiso, safe at last! Then we traveled to Santiago, where we rented an apartment.

Mother could not practice medicine in Chile because she did not speak Spanish and her doctorate was from Europe. Also, she was a woman, and, when we arrived, there wasn't a single female physician in Chile. Mother feverishly started studying Spanish to be able to take her medical exams in Spanish anyway.

In the meantime, mother was given a position as a midwife at Hospital San Borja. For the Christmas season Mother, being Jewish, offered to cover the hospital practice herself, so that the Christian doctors could have that time off to be with their families. Christmas season in Chile is in the summertime, so many families enjoy a holiday together then.

During that period mother contracted an infection from a patient she was attending. As a child she had had rheumatic fever, which had affected her heart valves. Antibiotics were not yet available in Chile in 1939 when Mother became ill, and the infection moved to her heart. Other doctors, away for Christmas week, were not readily available to take care of her quickly when she became ill. Suddenly, on New Year's Day in 1940, my young mother died.

The most important person in my early life, my mother, who gave me birth, tender care, happiness, and saved my life by simply asking a question, was gone.

The extremely high Andes Mountains rise steeply above Santiago where we lived. My father told me that Mother had gone to the mountains to pick flowers. I was only 2½ years old.

